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# Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 11

Henry Mitchell

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## HENRY MITCHELL



The director and the board are too tender, too easily made nervous to man a citadel of art.

BY SUSAN DAVIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## Of Guts and the Gallery

**W**e are working down to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, if you'll hold on a little.

First, we need to remind ourselves the law of the land forbids any legislature from interfering with protected speech.

We also need to say it is now established that books, movies, photographs, magazines are all "speech" of the kind protected.

When speech turns to action the same protection does not apply. You may exhibit pictures at a gallery, but you may not hand out dirty photographs to tots.

But the Corcoran was not going to hand out anything. It was going to display Robert Mapplethorpe photographs that it considered important art. The show was canceled, though the pictures presumably are still high art. If the state had tried to block the show it would have been an outrage, actionable in court. For the gallery to cancel it is merely a disgrace to the gallery.

To explain the cancellation, the gallery blubbers that there is (Oh, good Lord) political interest in the National Endowment for the Arts, which spends public money on art that some taxpayers dislike. But that is a question in itself, distinct from the museum's killing its own show.

The Corcoran says it has no business getting in the middle of a political dispute.

But nobody asks the Corcoran to dispute, merely to display the art it has already said should be shown. If it fears argument outside the gallery, it should stick to portraits of dogs playing poker, which almost everybody likes, and even the Corcoran could probably

stand up to The League Against Gambling Mutts.

Mapplethorpe photographed some highly salacious tulips and other flowers that, let me tell you, are on the verge of orgasm and which are highly offensive to many gardeners. I like my tulips virginal, but defend the rights of those who like their flowers filthy.

His pictures also include men carrying on with women and naked ladies stretching themselves. They also show men naked as a jaybird, and men together, and men in leather jackets with man-made objects in posterior portions.

We have the Corcoran's word for it that all these are important art. We have the Constitution's word for it that they are protected speech.

A little aside, just here, on "redeeming social value" for things that might otherwise seem "pornographic." When Jimmy Swaggart was caught after dealings with a female prostitute, he insisted to the TV world for half an hour that he had sinned. He also was reported to have confessed to having a lifelong fascination with pornography.

Clearly, pornography had value for Swaggart, who is not everyone's idea of a saint; still, I can conceive that pornography may have been a vital part of his life, without which he might not have been able to shepherd his flock. As far as the Constitution is concerned, redeeming values are where the redemptee finds them.

And some might have been redeemed, so to speak, by the Mapplethorpe pictures. His images have not roused me to lust, but even if they had done so,

whose business is that? The government does well to stay outside my thoughts, and to interfere only when I dash to the street and alarm the horses.

The Constitution does not say we have free speech except when the folk of Bald Gizzard, Nev., disapprove of it.

Community standards was the great argument of the South which always maintained civil rights were all very well, but blacks did so much better not voting except when paid by political machines to do so. The Constitution applies to the nation even when the good folk of some village (or some majority) disapprove.

But back to the Corcoran, which thank God has nothing to do with law. The Corcoran's dazzling action when the question of the Mapplethorpe pictures came up was to tuck tail and run for the woods.

The gallery's high pretensions about the value of art are only babble, backed by nothing more impressive than the courage of a small rabbit. Mapplethorpe is a fine artist, the Corcoran says, until a senator (who possibly was never redeemed by art) raises a question about the National Endowment for the Arts, then the Corcoran says mercy, boss, we're so sorry we ever even thought of that Mr. Mapplethorpe.

The greatest gift to the city the Corcoran could bestow today would be a better director and more serious board. They may be cut out for some other honorable calling—selling hot-dogs on the street, possibly—but they are too tender, too easily made nervous, to man a citadel of art.